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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL HISTORY: REFLECTIONS ON *NENJUKKU NEEDHI*

S. Chandran*

Introduction

According to Oxford English Dictionary, an autobiography is an individual's account of his own life. It is biography, life-history, life story, and an account of the series of events making up a person's life. According to Collier's Encyclopaedia, autobiography, a form of biography in which the subject is also the author; it is generally written by the first person and covers most or an important phase of the author's life. Autobiography is a record of a person's real life, lived in a particular time and place. Autobiography not only deals with personal but also with public lives of the people. As autobiography is a life-history it is surely associated with reality. Fact is the soul of autobiography. It recreates life through the imaginative transformation of facts. However an autobiographer's treatment of fact is quite different from that of a historian. A historian is concerned with the results of the events while an autobiographer is concerned with the events themselves. A strict order of chronology is not expected from an auto biographer. An autobiography usually does not follow the chronology of details. Autobiographical form reveals different aspects that can be classified into subjectivity, self-revelation, introspection and self concealment.[1] Autobiography, as the very term suggests is a life story written by the person himself. It includes all the events of a person's life right from his childhood.

When autobiography is written by a political leader, he indulges himself in narrating other individuals and events so much so that his self is completely dissolved. Most of them seek the help of ghostwriters who may be professional who carefully reflect the leader's subjectivity. Sometimes, such work would be hagiography. However, an autobiographer is in search for himself through the history. Autobiography is a reconstruction of the past. The autobiographical act is a kind of a link between the present and the past of the writer. Autobiographers frequently resort to acts of censoring and distorting facts not to speak of concocting ideas to enhance their self image.[2]

*Professor, Department of Political Science, VMKV Arts and Science College, Peria Seeragapadi, Salem-636 308.

Examples of formal autobiography exist in ancient times as well. During the 2nd century B.C., the Chinese historian Ssu-Ma wrote a brief account of himself in his *Historical Records*. *The Commentaries* written by Julius Caesar revealed about himself and the conquest of Gaul. In the middle ages, *The Confessions* of St. Augustine remains an example of life story. In Europe autobiography begins with the Renaissance. During the 18th century autobiographies were written by Benjamin Franklin, Edward Gibbon and Rousseau. J. S. Mill's *Autobiography* and Edmund Goss's *Father and Son* (1907) remain an example of intellectual autobiographies. Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kempf* (1924) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) are considered as thematic autobiographies. There are fictional autobiographies as well. Samuel Butler's *Way of all flesh* (1903), James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and George Santayana's *Last Puritan* are fictional in character.

Autobiographical Writings in India

Autobiography or biography appeared in India since ancient times.[3] Scattered writings of some unknown authors can be found in *Rig Veda* and Buddhist literature. In the later Sanskrit literature, Bana's life story appeared in the first few chapters of *Harshacharitam*. In the Mughal literature, *Babarnama* and *Tuzauk-i-Jahangiri* carried the authors' life sketch. The first piece of autobiographical writing in English was written by Raja Rammohan Roy. His *Short Autobiographical Sketch* (1833) is realistic in nature. In fact C. Rajagopalachari was a forerunner in writing memoir in nationalist tones. His *Siraiyil Thavam* (1922) remains a classic record. Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* (1927) written in Yeravada jail appeared first in a Gujarati weekly *Navajivan*. In 1940 it was translated into English by Mahatma's secretary, Mahadevbhai Desai. Lala Lajpat Rai's *The Story of My Deportation* (1908), Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936) are notable autobiographies. After independence, among the most outstanding of them are Morarji Desai's *The Story of My Life* published in three volumes between 1974 and 1979 and L.K. Advani's *My Country My Life* (2008).

Autobiography of Political Leaders in Tamil Nadu

Few leaders have written reflecting the political history of Tamil Nadu in their autobiographical writings. For instance, Thiru Vi Kaliyanasundram's *Thiru Vi Ka Vaalkai Kurippugal* (1969),[4] M. Bakthavatchalam's *Enadhu Ninaivugal* (1971),[5] M.G. Ramachandran's *Naan Yen Pirenthen* (1971-72),[6] Ma. Po. Sivagnanam's *Enadhu Porattam* (1980),[7] Kannadasan's *Vanavasam*,[8] and C.Subramaniam's, *Hand of Destiny: Memoirs* (1993).[9] An extensive account of autobiographical work with narrative tone of political history is done by Karunanidhi in his *Nenjukku Needhi*, which continues even after six volumes covering more than seventy years of his political life.[10]

Political History in *Neenjukku Needhi*

Karunanidhi wrote his first series of memoir, i.e., *Nenjukku Needhi* in *Dinamani Kadir* covering his life story between 1924 and 1969. The second series appeared in *Kunkumam* which narrated his political career up to 1976. The third volume covered his life story between 1976 and 1988. The fourth speaks about his life between 1989 and 1996. The fifth volume appeared in *Murasoli*. So far six volumes have been written by him. In all his volumes, he tried to keep the chronological order. However, it is not always possible when reference is made between the past and the future as his span of life is more than ninety years. The merit of his work shows its historical dimension of his public life along with his contemporaries. When one reads Paramahamsa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, one can come to understand not only the life story of Yogananda but also the very philosophy and practice of yoga. When one reads Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, one can understand the real face of Nazism. In the same way, when one reads Karunanidhi's *Nenjukku Needhi*, one can know not only his life but also the political history of Tamil Nadu in general and the Dravidian Movement in particular.

His autobiography is a combination of his literary talent and historical interests. On this foundation, his sharp way of self-justification for his rational outlook is evident in every statement of his writings. Besides, the fold of Dravidian ideology is obviously used in promoting language issue, social justice, state autonomy, and parliamentary democracy. He is open in acknowledging the ideas of Periyar and Anna. Though he is a man of letters, he never hesitates to discuss with Tamil scholars and writers for some clarification.

Certain views attracted different reactions from opposition leaders. For instance, the demands of EVK Sampath,[11] the expulsion of M.G. Ramachandran from the DMK,[12] the events that led to his assumption of Chief Minister after the demise of Anna, emergency situations and consequences,[13] alliance with the Congress to defeat the ADMK, and expulsion of Vaiko, Sri Lankan Tamil issue, etc generate multiple views and conflicting opinions from the Congress, BJP, Communist and the state parties especially, the ADMK.

Several parameters and challenges exist in writing history or using history to illustrate one's life story. Neutrality and self-justification are always problematic in narrating life story. Moreover, events may happen in which history has turning points or breakthrough. One has to carefully investigate which dominates and determines the particular event.[14] This situation explains the authors reasoning for expulsion of MGR and his alliance with the Congress, the Janata or the BJP. In some places, his validates the kinship being changed into political community to sustain power structure.

Despite all these remarks, no works exist in Tamil Nadu to challenge the literary and historical merits of his writings. A single source of contemporary political history of Tamil Nadu through his autobiography in six volumes is a tremendous task. When Churchill wrote his six volumes account of *Second World War*, he managed to keep all the diplomatic and war records with an office of staff and editors. But, Karunanidhi wrote his *Nenjukku Needhi* by his own effort with little personal assistance. It is said that he used to keep diary which contains day to day events. Besides, every day he writes letters to *Murosoli*. He always keeps a personal assistance to take note of what he speaks in public meetings. He always likes to meet people, talk and discuss. He listens, questions, answers, and he does not hesitate to give his critical remarks or appreciation. Even after ninety years of age, he keeps his speech and writings in clear terms. He writes history and makes history. His autobiography obviously certifies that he is not only a man of letters but also an authentic historian.

Conclusion

This paper explores how political history is systematically used for autobiography. *Nenjukku Needhi*, the autobiography of Kalaignar Karunanidhi, is a masterpiece of literature as well as a historical account. It skillfully combines his life with the concrete political events of Tamil Nadu. Unlike several political leaders, who had neither time nor capacity to write autobiography, or who depend upon some ghost writers to write their life histories, Karunanidhi personally wrote his autobiography in his own capacity and knowledge. His autobiography shows his living spirit. His work remains a single source in understanding the political history of Tamil Nadu in a comprehensive way.

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